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AUTHOR Winslow, Emily B.; Shaw, Daniel S.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined relations among maternal stress, social support, adjustment, and the use of positive (encouraging) or negative (punitive) control strategies in a low socioeconomic status sample. The study sample consisted of 40 mother-son dyads examined longitudinally when the children were 18 and 24 months of age. During this period, mothers generally begin to increase their use of disciplinary strategies due to children's increasing mobility and cognitive development. At both assessments, mothers and their sons participated in a structured clean-up task designed to elicit the use of maternal control strategies. Mothers also completed self-report measures of daily child-rearing problems, social support, marital satisfaction, depressive symptomatology, and demographic information. Child compliance and noncompliance during the tasks were rated. Study findings included the following: (1) mothers experiencing low marital satisfaction and low social support at the 18-month assessment used more punitive strategies at 24 months; (2) 18-month maternal self-report indices were associated more strongly with 24-month control strategies than 18-month strategies; (3) though the quality of support and satisfaction mothers received from significant relationships seemed to influence the development of parenting style, daily child-rearing stress did not correlate significantly with maternal stress at either age; and (4) mothers reporting lower relationship satisfaction, lower support, and lower adjustment did not employ significantly fewer contingent control strategies. (AC)

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Relations Among Indices of Maternal Stress, Support, Adjustment, and Parenting Strategies: A Study of Low-Income Families

Emily B. Winslow and Daniel S. Shaw

University of Pittsburgh

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Relations Among Indices of Maternal Stress, Support, Adjustment, and Parenting Strategies: A Study of Low-Income Families

Researchers investigating relations between childrearing practices and child adjustment have demonstrated that power-assertive, punitive, and inconsistent discipline strategies are associated with negative outcomes such as behavior problems. Investigators have shown that demographic characteristics such as low socioeconomic status (SES), as well as indicators of maternal adjustment such as depression, are related to the use of these strategies. However, the majority of studies have employed school-age or adolescent children, even though most developmentalists agree that parental discipline styles begin to develop earlier in the parent-child relationship. Few studies have been directed at uncovering the early antecedents of childrearing practices. Even fewer have examined this issue while controlling for the behavioral characteristics of the child, despite the recognition in the field of the importance of using reciprocal models. Finally, few studies have been conducted with children from low SES backgrounds, although they have a greater risk of developing psychopathology.

The present study examined relations among indices of maternal stress, support, adjustment, and the use of control strategies in a low SES sample. Because boys have a greater risk of developing psychopathology than girls, the current sample consisted of 40 mother-son dyads examined longitudinally when children were 18 and 24 months of age. During this period of development, mothers generally begin to increase their use of disciplinary strategies due to children's increasing mobility and cognitive development. At both assessments, mothers and their sons participated in a structured clean-up task designed to

elicit the use of maternal control strategies. Mothers also completed self-report measures of daily childrearing hassles, social support, marital satisfaction, depressive symptomatology, and demographic information. In addition to coding mothers' behavior, child compliance and noncompliance during the lab tasks were rated, making it possible to assess the extent to which mothers' control strategies were contingent on children's behavior. In so doing, the mothers' behavior was examined while controlling for the children's influences on the interactions.

Correlational procedures were used to test the hypothesis that mothers who report greater stress, poorer adjustment, and less support employ control strategies that are more punitive and less contingent on their children's behavior. In addition, hierarchical regression procedures were employed to examine mothers' discipline styles at 24 months. Results indicated that 18-month maternal variables contributed unique variance to the prediction of 24-month control strategies after 18-month control strategies had been entered into the regression equation. Specifically, mothers experiencing low relationship satisfaction and low social support at the 18-month assessment used more punitive strategies at 24 months. In fact, 18-month maternal self-report indices were associated more strongly with 24-month control strategies than with 18-month strategies. Although not conclusive, these results suggest that the quality of support and satisfaction a mother receives from significant relationships influences the development of her parenting style. However, daily childrearing stress did not correlate significantly with maternal strategies at either age. Moreover, results did not provide evidence that mothers reporting lower relationship satisfaction, lower support, and lower adjustment employ less contingent control strategies.

MEASURES

1. Molecular and molar observer ratings of maternal control strategies used during a structured lab clean-up task

2. Self-report measure of relationship satisfaction with significant other (usually husband or boyfriend) (Locke & Wallace Marital Adjustment Inventory)

3. Self-report measure of social support (Pascoe & Earp's Maternal Social Support Inventory)

4. Self-report measure of depressive symptomatology (Beck Depression Inventory)

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

(N = 40)

FAMILY INCOME	Mean = $974 per month 30% earn < $6000 per year
MARITAL STATUS	67% married/living together 28% single 5% separated/divorced
MATERNAL EDUCATION	10% < high school 53% high school degree
ETHNICITY	42% African American, 50% White
MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT	63% unemployed

OBSERVER RATINGS OF MATERNAL CONTROL STRATEGIES

POSITIVE (ENCOURAGING)

Praise- Child On-Task

Praise- Off-Task

Verbal Approval- On

Verbal Approval- Off

Physical Approval- On

Physical Approval- Off

NEGATIVE (PUNITIVE)

Negative Physical Contact- On
- Off

Force/Restriction- On
- Off

Threat Negative Physical - On
- Off

Threat Nonphysical Punish- On
- Off

Verbal Reprimand- On
- Off

Prohibition- On
- Off

CORRELATIONS AMONG SELF-REPORT MEASURES AT 18 MO. AND OBSERVER RATINGS OF CONTROL STRATEGIES AT 24 MO.

	[a] NON-CONTINGENT (POSITIVE)	[a] NON-CONTINGENT (NEGATIVE)	[a] % NEGATIVE STRATEGIES	[b] HOSTILITY	[b] HARSHNESS
MATERNAL EDUCATION	-0.25 #	0.14	-0.43 *	-0.20 c	-0.26 c
INCOME	0.00	-0.24 #	-0.05	-0.27 * c	-0.23
DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS	0.26 *	-0.25 #	0.01	-0.03	0.08 c
SOCIAL SUPPORT	-0.12	0.10	-0.32 * c	-0.34 *	-0.47 * c
RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION	-0.25 #	0.14	-0.40 *	-0.31 *	-0.21
DAILY HASSLES	0.03	-0.09	0.12	-0.04	0.12

*p < .05
#p < .10

[a]molecular ratings
[b]global ratings
[c]correlation significant at 18 mo.

PREDICTORS OF PUNITIVE STRATEGIES AT 24 MONTHS

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: % OF PUNITIVE STRATEGIES AT 24 MONTHS (MOLECULAR RATING)

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	MULTIPLE R	R SQUARE	F	SIGNIFICANCE OF F CHANGE
MATERNAL EDUCATION--18 MO.	0.44	0.19	-3.0	0.006
PUNITIVE STRATEGIES--18 MO. (MOLECULAR)	0.47	0.22	1.2	0.25
RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION--18 MO.	0.56	0.31	-2.0	0.05

Overall F = 5.06, $p < 0.006$

PREDICTORS OF HARSH PARENTING AT 24 MONTHS

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: 24 MO. GLOBAL RATING OF HARSH STRATEGIES

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	MULTIPLE R	R SQUARE	F	SIGNIFICANCE OF F CHANGE
INCOME--18 MO.	0.25	0.06	-1.6	0.12
HARSH STRATEGIES--18 MO. (GLOBAL RATING)	0.33	0.11	1.3	0.19
RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION--18 MO.	0.35	0.12	-0.7	0.46
SOCIAL SUPPORT--18 MO.	0.50	0.26	-2.4	0.02
RELATIONSHIP SATIS. x SOCIAL SUPPORT--18 MO.	0.57	0.33	-1.9	0.07

Overall F = 3.15, $p < 0.03$